

Message Text

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ACTION ARA-14

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FM AMEMBASSY KINGSTON
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 0704
INFO AMEMBASSY BRIDGETOWN
AMEMBASSY GEORGETOWN
AMEMBASSY NASSAU
AMEMBASSY PORT OF SPAIN

C O N F I D E N T I A L KINGSTON 3293

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: ELAB, PINS, JM
SUBJECT: LABOR TROUBLE MOUNTS AGAIN

1. LABOR UNREST, WHICH HAS BEEN ENDEMIC OVER RECENT MONTHS, HAS INCREASED OVER THE LAST WEEKS. THE KINGSTON PORT HAS BEEN BROUGHT TO A STANDSTILL, BUS SERVICE IN KINGSTON IS HALTED, THE TELEPHONE COMPANY'S STAFF IS GROWING IMPATIENT FOR A LONG-DELAYED CONTRACT AWARD, TEXACO WORKERS INVOLVED IN PROTRACTED WAGE NEGOTIATIONS ARE RESTIVE, THE BAKING INDUSTRY CONFRONTS A POSSIBLE CLOSURE, THE SOLE PRODUCER OF EDIBLE OILS AND FATS, SOAPS AND DETERGENTS HAS BEEN SUFFERING FROM A SLOW-DOWN, AND TWO FIRMS WHICH ARE ACTIVE IN THE EXPORT FIELD -- CARIBBEAN CEMENT AND JAMAICAN HERITAGE (A FURNITURE MAKER) -- ARE STRUCK.

2. WITH THE EXCEPTION OF THE PORT AND BUS STRIKES, THE OTHERS ALL INVOLVE WAGE AND BENEFITS DEMANDS. THE FACT OF HARD BARGAINING FOR INCREASED PAY AND BENEFITS AT A TIME WHEN JAMAICA IS SUFFERING CONSIDERABLE INFLATION IS UNSURPRISING. HOWEVER, THE TENACITY WITH WHICH THE
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DEMANDS ARE BEING PRESSED MAY BE OUT OF THE ORDINARY AND REFLECT TWO FACTORS. FIRST, THERE IS INCREASING RIVALRY BETWEEN UNIONS, PARTICULARLY AS THE NATIONAL WORKERS UNION (NWU), THE LABOR AFFILIATE OF THE PEOPLE'S NATIONAL PARTY (PNP), LOSES A MEASURE OF ITS SUPPORT THROUGH ITS IDENTIFICATION WITH THE RULING PARTY AND ITS RECKLESS MANAGEMENT OF THE ECONOMY. AS A

RESULT, THE OTHER UNIONS, AND MOST PARTICULARLY THE BUSTAMANTE INDUSTRIAL TRADE UNION (BITU), THE OPPOSITION JAMAICA LABOUR PARTY'S LABOR ARM, SEEK TO WIN AWAY LOCALS FROM THE NWU WHICH, IN TURN, ENDEAVORS TO SHOW THAT IT IS BETTER ABLE TO WRING CONCESSIONS FROM EMPLOYERS -- PRIVATE OR PUBLIC SECTOR -- THAN THE OTHERS.

3. A SECOND FACTOR MAY LIE IN UNCERTAINTY REGARDING THE SCOPE OF JAMAICA'S NEW AGREEMENT WITH THE INTERNATIONAL MONETARY FUND (IMF), WHICH IS PRESENTLY UNDER NEGOTIATION. MANY TRADE UNIONISTS FEAR THAT THE NEW AGREEMENT MAY REQUIRE THE JAMAICAN GOVERNMENT TO DEVALUE FURTHER AND TO IMPOSE STRINGENT CEILINGS ON SALARIES AND WAGES, AND THEY ARE SEEKING TO OBTAIN AS GENEROUS CONTRACTS AS THEY CAN BEFORE IT IS TOO LATE.

4. THE BUS STRIKE AND THAT IN THE PORT ARISE DIFFERENTLY. THE STAFF OF THE JAMAICAN OMNIBUS SERVICE STRUCK TO PROTEST THE STABBING OF A CONDUCTRESS IN A CONTROVERSY OVER THE FARE TO BE PAID; SINCE IT IS THE RIDING PUBLIC WHICH IS THE TARGET OF THE STRIKE, THE DURATION SHOULD BE BRIEF. IN THE PORT, THE STRIKE HAS ARISEN OUT OF THE ARREST OF A SUPERVISOR FOR SUSPECTED COLLUSION IN THE THEFT OF SALT FISH (A JAMAICAN STAPLE) FROM THE PORT AREA. THE PORT SUPERVISORS ARE PROTESTING THE ARREST, AND DEMANDING THAT THE PORT SECURITY

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INVESTIGATOR WHO BROUGHT THE CHARGES BE FIRED. WHILE ONLY THE SUPERVISORS BEGAN THE STRIKE, OTHER WORKERS -- INCLUDING PILOTS -- HAVE JOINED THEM, AND THUS THE PORT IS AT A STANDSTILL. IN AN EFFORT TO GET THE PORT BACK INTO OPERATION, THE JAMAICA DEFENCE FORCE WAS SENT IN ON APRIL 12. THIS IS THE THIRD TIME TROOPS HAVE BEEN SO USED IN THE LAST YEAR.

IRVING

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